

STUDENT
ANTHOLOGY

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EMPOWERED VOICES

ADULT EDUCATION JOURNEYS

OAKLAND
LITERACY
COUNCIL

EMPOWERED VOICES

Student Anthology

The personal narratives in this anthology were written by adult learners enrolled in Oakland Literacy Council’s education program. In the spring of 2025, these learners participated in *Empowered Voices*, a workshop made possible by a grant from Kirk in the Hills Church in Bloomfield Hills. The workshop focused on the art of advocacy and the power of personal storytelling. Led by Amy Sung, language arts instructor and Oakland Literacy tutor, and Erin Vobornik, Initiatives Director at the Coalition on Adult Basic Education, the workshop encouraged participants to share their journey in adult education through writing, public speaking, and video production. The stories collected here reflect their lived experiences, challenges, and triumphs as adult learners, offering a powerful glimpse into the transformative impact of education. We thank volunteer Sue Crenshaw for compiling their stories into this anthology.



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Education is the Greatest Thing

By Rachester Motley



My mom was born down South. She had to work in the fields and pick cotton day and night. Going to school was not a priority. My Mom did not have access to education.

Mom moved our family to Detroit for a better life. I was one of eighteen kids. I was the baby. By the time my mom got to me, she was worn out. Mom had tuberculosis, and she was hospitalized for a long time. It was extremely hard for me to get an education because of Mom's health. My siblings were grown. I did not get the support I needed.

I did not graduate from high school. At the time, I did not know that I had dyslexia. I never knew why it was hard for me to focus on things in school, or why reading was such a challenge. Back then, people like me did not have the support they

needed to learn. I got so discouraged that I left school as soon as I was old enough. I started working.

I did not want my son to suffer like I did. I pushed him to get an education. Every day I got him up for school. I told my son that he would graduate. Today he has a college degree. My son has also gone back to school to get more degrees for his career. My grandchildren are all educated.

Three or four years ago, I found Oakland Literacy Council and started an adult education program. I wanted to get an education because I wanted to be more independent. I wanted to be able to read and understand my mail. I have a wonderful tutor at Oakland Literacy Council named Jill. For the first time, I had the chance to learn with someone one on one. Jill realized I had dyslexia. She researched ways to help me.

Jill and I started off by sounding words out and breaking words down. I never knew how to do that. Now I can understand my mail. I can read a lot better. I can even read words I have never seen before.

When I'm walking my dogs, I'm amazed by all the words on the street signs and posters that I can read now. It's exciting to understand when I look at things and to be able to read what I actually see. Sometimes I struggle, but I like challenges.

My tutor understands me. Sometimes I say, "Jill, did you know what you were getting into when you took me on?"

Jill smiles and says, "I know what I'm doing."

Jill is proud of me. She sees progress in me. I have come a very long way. I always valued education, but I value education even more now. Having your education gives you power. My father always said, "Understanding is the greatest thing in the world." I believe education is the greatest thing in the world.

To other people with dyslexia, I would say this: Learning with dyslexia is a lot of hard work. But there are people out there who are willing to teach you. You will be amazed at all the things you can learn. With the right support, it can happen! It makes you feel really great about yourself.

With My Own Wings

By Karla Hernandez



My name is Karla. I am from Mexico. I grew up in a colorful, magical town filled with traditions, flavors, and the warm scents of homemade food in the air. I was surrounded by the smell of fresh bread and the sound of Mariachi music. It was a beautiful place where I had a joyful childhood. It was a place that made me feel truly happy. My mom was the most important person to me when I was growing up. She showed me values. Because of Mom, I always try to help others.

In the past, girls and women did not have as many opportunities as they do today. I went to a strict Catholic school where the nuns' authority was absolute and expressing yourself was discouraged. As a kid, I was a happy dreamer. This experience made me afraid to be myself.

Then I got married and had two kids. My ex-husband worked out of town. He left every day at 5:00 a.m., and usually came back around 9:00 p.m. I was 100% in charge of our children's education and activities. He used to tell me that I had no reason to complain because I "had everything" with him. But the truth is, I did not have the most important thing, my autonomy.

Despite that, I had the wonderful opportunity to focus on my children. They are my everything and my reason for living. They are well-educated, respectful, and full of dreams. I am deeply proud of them. My oldest son, Carlos, is in Australia studying finance. He is following his dreams and building his own path. Seeing him go so far with such determination is very gratifying.

I believe a mother's work never ends. I love those phone calls where my sons share their stories, their fears, and their dreams. Being their emotional support is priceless.

In 2022, I moved to the United States. It has been a real challenge. Facing the language barrier and adapting to a culture where everything moves fast and time is money has not been easy. It has brought me to tears being so far away from my family. Loneliness has been part of my journey. But I have never given up. I believe it is never too late to start over.

I have taken small but steady steps forward. Education is an important part of my journey to independence. Casa Amiga helped me find a finance course through Comerica Bank. I am currently studying English and taking a PowerPoint class with Oakland Literacy Council.

One of my biggest dreams is to study psychology. Learning English will help me to do this. I love helping others. I want to support women, especially those who come from cultures where women are often limited or silenced by tradition and education. I want to help them break free from those limiting beliefs.

This is my story. A story of resilience, hope, and starting over. I may have come from far away. But my heart is full of dreams. I know that with every step I take, I am building a new life; not just for me, but to inspire other women to believe that they can do it too.

Learning English to be Independent Again

By Randa Hamza



All my life was in Egypt. I studied Business Administration at the University. After I graduated, I worked in marketing, social media, and human resources in many different companies. I lived with my mom. I had a very busy life with my family, friends, and work.

I met my husband through a common friend. Before we married, my husband and I talked all the time. We had a long-distance relationship. I was in Egypt, and he lived in the United States.

I saw my husband face-to-face for the first time when I came to the United States to visit my nephews. It was love at first sight! We got engaged after two months. My husband and I got married on May 25th, 2024. I came to the United States in January of 2024.

It was so hard to leave Egypt. This is the first time I have left my country. This is the first time I have been away from my mom. When I started life all over again in a new country, there were too many changes. In Egypt, I had work and a social life. Life in the United States is so different. It is difficult.

I want to learn English because I want to have a life like I had in Egypt. In Egypt, I was independent in every part of my life. It is very sad not to be independent. I want friends, a social life, and work. I want to be able to talk to my doctor. I want to communicate with people by myself instead of needing someone like my husband to always go with me. My husband has a job. He cannot always go with me to every place.

I found Oakland Literacy Council in July of 2024. I asked the Waterford Library about places that have English courses. They told me about Oakland Literacy Council. When I started English classes at OLC, they introduced me to my teachers, Sandy and Lauren. They helped me improve my English by teaching me phonics, grammar, and conversation. My English is much better than when I first came to the United States.

I am proud that I can introduce myself. This is the first step to having a social life and being independent. My husband and family are very proud of me. They see how hard I am working. They see how much I have improved. I am proud that I can tell my story in English.

I have many goals. I want to go to university. I want a job. When I have a child, I want to speak to his or her teacher at school. I want to help my child with schoolwork. I need to speak English to do all these things.

I like challenges. Learning English is not just a challenge; it is an essential thing. If I continue to work hard, I will be fluent someday. I will achieve my goals. Telling my story is important because I will be proud of myself when I read it. This story will help others like me who are trying to learn English. I want people who hear my story to be encouraged. If they learn English, they can have the lives that they want in the United States.

Labrea's Legacy Story

By Labrea Robinson



My name is Labrea. I'm from Detroit. When I was growing up, I was actually on the honor roll. I was in sports and all kinds of activities.

I took a bad turn in high school. I started doing teenager stuff, and it took a toll on my academics. The stuff I learned in high school, it went away over the years. I was also getting in trouble over the years. I didn't graduate from high school.

After that, I ended up going to girls' homes and etcetera. I worked very hard to get high school credits, but the system lost all the credits. I had nothing to show for all my hard work. This led me to have to start high school all over again. I was extremely discouraged for a decade. I didn't want to go back to school after having such a terrible experience.

I was working at a cashier job that was not paying enough, and the working conditions were horrible. Every day at work gave me the motivation I needed to get an education. I knew I needed a GED to open opportunities for me and my daughter. I want to go to college and work in computer science.

One day, I Googled GED places near me. Oakland Literacy Council popped up, and it had great reviews. I love this program. My tutor at Oakland Literacy and I work on the stuff I struggle with. Before, I had problems with my speech. Now I speak much better. I read and communicate much better. I like the fact that my tutor cares about my education. That's all it takes for somebody to keep going. I hope to get my GED by the end of this year. Right after that, I plan on starting college so I can have driven success. I've waited long enough!

It's important to tell my story because it's my mission. I was called to tell my story and put positivity into the world and my community. My story is for people who need motivation, who are procrastinating, and who have determination. Determination is what everything depends on at the end of the day. It's my legacy to make people see what is possible.

How I Am Achieving My English Goals

By Dhammavihara Galaboda



My story begins in Sri Lanka. When I was a teenager, a woman came to our Buddhist temple. She spoke English to me. She became my good friend and pushed me to learn English. I did not understand at first. My friend was always telling me I could do it.

In 2021, I came to the United States. I came to do religious work. It is my dream to instruct others about Buddhist teachings such as how to achieve freedom and how to feel happiness in the moment. I had to learn English to do this. Learning another language is difficult. Communication with others is very hard if you do not know English.

I told the people at my temple that I wanted to find some classes to improve my English. August 29th, 2023 was an important date in my life. That was the day I started

studying English at Oakland Literacy Council. Oakland Literacy Council has been very helpful. They give me the homework on the Burlington English application. They check my homework and give me assignments every week. They are very good lessons. Oakland Literacy Council introduced me to a volunteer tutor. He helped me with the lessons and understanding daily life in the United States.

When people like me come to the United States, we must know how to speak English to do basic things. We must go to the store, to the doctor, to the bank, and to our jobs. We can't always depend on someone who knows English to come with us all the time. The best thing about Burlington English is that the program teaches me how to do all these things! Once you can speak English, you achieve independence.

I have come a long way in a short time. Knowing more English makes my life better. Now I can teach others about my country, Sri Lanka. I can help people understand what Buddha taught us: how to live in the present moment with happiness. Americans and people from all over the world come to our temple. I can help them by showing everyone how to focus their minds with meditation. I feel it is important to tell my story because we are all searching for freedom and joy. Now I can use English to teach people how to look inward for happiness. It is something we all have to cultivate.

You Will Get There No Matter Which Way You Go

By Thu Lê



I was born in a small town in the countryside of Vietnam. My dad inspired me. He is a very strong man on the outside and on the inside. He never gives up, always tries his best, and he never complains. Even when sad things happen, Dad always tries to smile and stay positive.

When I was growing up, my family was poor. My parents worked late at night and woke up at dawn to make enough money to send me and my siblings to college. When I took the exam to get into the university, I got a high score.

I studied banking and finance because I thought I could make a lot of money to help my parents. I got a job in a big bank. My dad and mom were proud. That was the most important thing to me. More valuable than money.

In 2020, I came to Texas to live with my husband. Right after I arrived everything shut down. My priority was learning English, but we did not have money to pay for classes.

It was very lonely. I left everything behind to come here. No friends, no relatives, and no work. Time flew and I had two babies. Learning English was left behind because I was so busy.

I moved to Michigan and had a kind neighbor. I really wanted to have friends, and I tried to talk with him. But we could not understand each other. That was the point that made me realize I needed to improve my English-speaking skills.

I thought, *I need to do something*. I went to the public library and saw a flyer from Oakland Literacy Council asking for a volunteer English tutor. I thought, *if they are looking for tutors, there must be classes*. I called the Oakland Literacy Council. At first, they didn't have a tutor for me. After five months, they found me a tutor. I also joined a conversation class.

Once I started working with a tutor, my English speaking and pronunciation became much better. I can communicate with my nice neighbor very well. I can make phone calls and order online easily.

Now that I am more confident, I can plan for my future. I am taking a course for a Master of Science Degree in Analytics.

I can't believe I have come so far from where I began. My parents are farmers. I was one of the first people in the whole big family to get into university. Now I'm going to college in the United States.

In Vietnam they say, "Có chí thì nên." It means, "If you work hard, you will get there no matter which way you go." I am on my way!

Put God First and Everything Falls in Place

By Evelyn Briggs



The greatest lesson I ever learned in my life was to stay positive. I was born down South in Louisiana. Growing up, I did well in school. I should have finished, but I didn't. I had less than six months before graduation. Then life happened.

As the years went by, I had to stay at home and take care of the children. I was a busybody, and there was not a lot of time for going to school. Raising kids is a 24/7 job.

Once my kids were grown up, and I raised my oldest granddaughter, I decided to do something for myself. Getting my GED was the first thing on my bucket list. By this time, I'd worked all over the map. God already blessed me to do many things I wanted to do. One was getting into the nursing field. My passion was being a nurse's assistant

and taking care of elderly people. Also, I was a forklift driver. I even drove an 18-wheel truck. I accomplished all of that.

When God had given me so much, I knew that getting my GED would be no problem. Whatever you need, you speak it into existence, and it will happen. Finding Oakland Literacy Council seemed like an accident at the time, but it really wasn't. I called three different places. Oakland Literacy Council was the only place that called me back. It was meant to be.

At Oakland Literacy Council, they asked me what I needed and what I wanted. They helped me by giving me books, a laptop, and everything I needed to get started. I loved my math, social studies, and reading classes. All my teachers and tutors were totally awesome! I am on top of the world because I finally have the chance to get my GED.

I wanted to go back to school for myself and for my grandkids. To show them that you can do what you set your mind to do. It's important to tell my story because you never know what people are going through. They may be going through some hard times. They may be wondering, *How can I make my situation better? What can I do to make this better?* My story may be the one thing they need to hear. I want to send positivity to tell them that they CAN do this. They CAN achieve their goals. Never EVER give up!

God says, "Seek and you shall find. Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you." But you won't find it if you're not looking. If you're not knocking, the door won't

open. Always start your day with the word of God. Always start with a prayer. Always put God first, and everything else will fall in place.

Don't Stop Dreaming. The Sky is the Limit!

By Martha Garcia



My grandma was very important to me when I was growing up in Mexico. Sadly, she had diabetes and arthritis. When Grandma died, I promised I would help people with diseases. I studied nutrition in college. I worked as a nutritionist in a hospital in Mexico.

Seven years ago, I got married and came to the United States. Starting a new life was difficult and lonely. In Mexico, I was independent. I had a job, friends, and a social life. Because I didn't speak English, I couldn't communicate with anyone but my husband. I was dependent on my husband. I didn't have work. I didn't have a social life. I was isolated.

Learning English was a priority for me. But I had a baby and then the Pandemic happened. Finally, I started studying English last year. I couldn't study at the university because it was so expensive. I asked my husband to buy English books so I could study myself at home. It is hard to learn English this way.

My husband found Oakland Literacy Council in my social thread on Instagram. Oakland Literacy Council was offering English classes for free! I took a conversation class with Amy, a tutor at Oakland Literacy Council. When the class was over, Amy offered to be my tutor.

Now my life is much better. I can go to the restaurant and choose my food. I can talk to my son's teacher and the other moms at school. When I go shopping, I can talk to customer service. I can understand my doctor. I have confidence because I am not afraid to speak English.

My world is bigger. I feel like I can dream again and make plans. When I am fluent in English, I will study to be a nurse. I will work because I need independence for myself and my children. I want other women and moms to hear my story. My advice to them is never stop dreaming! There are no limits to the dreams of your heart!

My Epiphany

By Min Jung Lee



When I moved to the United States, I became a complete stranger in a foreign land. It was a feeling I never experienced while living in Korea. In Korea, I lived in the heart of Seoul. I was a homemaker in a middle-class family without any significant hardships.

Life in the United States was the first time I felt out of my comfort zone. Although I studied English in Korea, I did not have much confidence communicating with native speakers. I found myself hesitating constantly whether it was returning an item, making a doctor's appointment, or visiting my children's school. I would pause, unsure and anxious.

Then I met my tutor, Luci, through Oakland Literacy Council. Initially, I was somewhat overwhelmed by her intensity and enthusiasm. Luci was very strict about pronunciation. She was committed to showing up exactly on time and using every minute of the tutoring session for learning. Her style matched my style perfectly. We also both loved books and enjoyed sharing ideas and feelings from them.

Connecting with my English language mother was a blessing. Step-by-step Luci helped me move forward; not only learning English but also becoming part of a community. Working with Luci helped me realize that my thoughts and emotions are not so different from those of Americans. This gave me the confidence to express myself more freely.

It was the Epiphany. Luci's example of service is my bridge to advocating for other Koreans who wish to be part of the community but hesitate due to language barriers. Right now I am the host of the Korean Culture Club and book clubs at the Troy Library. Even though I still struggle at times to speak English, I push forward. I hope my example encourages other English language students to keep going.

Becoming Myself Again

By Karina Linares



My mother was an inspiration to me when I was growing up in Mexico. She is very independent. She is a wife and a mother. She was a nurse. I saw that she could do everything. Mom thought education was important. She was so proud when I got my bachelor's degree in social work.

I am independent like Mom. I was the first daughter to move out of my house. It was difficult, but I did it. I like challenges. One of my greatest challenges has been moving to the United States.

In Mexico, I worked in an organization to help women who were facing domestic abuse. Advocating for others is a big part of who I am. When I came to the United States, I had to give up my job. I lost a piece of myself.

When I tried to do activities like going to the supermarket, talking to neighbors, and meeting new people, it was difficult to communicate. I felt afraid and alone. I decided to look for an organization that provides English as a Second Language education.

I found Oakland Literacy Council through Centro Multicultural La Familia. I applied to Oakland Literacy Council, and I began volunteering at the Centro Multicultural La Familia. Getting an education and volunteering made me feel like there was sunlight and hope again.

Dinah is my tutor. All students probably say this, but I think Dinah is the best! She teaches me idioms, grammar, how to speak English, and how to practice for job interviews. Dinah helped me practice the job interview for the position I have now.

I feel like myself again. Now I can speak with different people. I know that I still need to improve. But I can say what I'm thinking, what I want, and what I need. I feel confident. I am working as a social worker. I advocate for others, especially Spanish-speaking families.

I want people to know that it's possible to start again. It's never too late to learn another language. You must study. You must focus on your goal. But if you really want to do something, you can do it!